EMPLOYMENT OF THE BLIND THROUGH THE USE OF STANDS IN PUBLIC BUILDINGS.

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EMPLOYMENT OF THE BLIND THROUGH THE USE OF STANDS IN PUBLIC BUILDINGS

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THERE is probably no vocational rehabilitation problem fraught with greater general and specific difficulties for the rehabilitation agent than those involved in the rehabilitation of the blind.

Recent wars and our modern industrial life have left a trail of maimed bodies. Only during the past seventy-five years have an appreciable number of these handicapped survived disabling injuries.

Centuries ago blindness represented a greater proportion of the disabled than at present. The reason for this is obvious. Lack of suitable surgical care insured the death of those who suffered major bodily injuries. The few who survived crippling injuries to arms and legs were almost curiosities. On the other hand, the ravages of disease which destroyed sight permitted the victim to live. These unfortunates were forced to rest on the bosom of charity. Early history reported them as helpless burdens on society. Down through the years this attitude toward the blind has persisted until, having been so thoroughly ground into the blood of our ancestors, today's society is skeptical of or indifferent to efforts to free the blind from dependency through vocational rehabilitation. The popular belief is that there is the precedent of the ages for the idleness of the blind, but the more "modern" disablements of our industrially

handicapped have no such background. Thus today's mind is open-minded to rehabilitation possibilities for all but the blind.

Only in comparatively recent years have concerted efforts paved the way for the introduction into industry and employment of ambitious and qualified blind persons. Certain routine mechanical operations have provided a natural outlet for these people. Independence has rewarded many of them who were mechanically inclined or who adapted themselves readily to industrial operations. As additional educational work is done among employers, there are further job possibilities for the blind in this direction.

Agricultural employment opportunities are but infrequently available to the blind. Only with great difficulty can this type of work be adjusted to their abilities.

Commercial and professional employment absorbs a small percentage of the blind and offers to the well qualified a fair degree of promise.

There are those, however, who without natural inclination, education, or personal qualifications, cannot succeed in the above fields but who are admirably adapted to merchandising operations of a suitable nature and size. Gratifying results have followed experiments in business ventures for and by the blind. The operation of stands provides an avenue through which certain of the blind may engage in business on a scale best adapted to their capabilities.

Many commodities are sold in stands which are located in buildings or on the sidewalk. Some stands are specialized in the display and sale of newspapers, magazines, and periodicals only. Others offer, in addition, candy, nuts, gum, tobacco goods, and even soft drinks. Some of the more pretentious are in reality small novelty stores with a wide assortment of low price "pick-up" merchandise. Stands, too, can mean refreshment booths and even lunch counters. The equipment of the stand may consist of nothing more than a simple rack for the stacking of newspapers. On the other hand, its elaborateness may involve the expenditure of several hundreds of dollars.

It must be kept in mind that stand operating is no more adapted to all blind persons than it is to all sighted ones. Mere physical blindness does not insure success in stand operating. However, among the blind there are a percentage of individuals whose business sagacity or natural store-keeping ability is just as keen as if they were sighted. With other things equal, these persons should make good in stand operating.

Due to limited employment opportunities available to the blind, there may be a temptation to exploit stand operating for them in such a very undesirable manner that the results might be embarrassing. If good judgment be not used in the selection of stand operators, and a few failures follow, the exquisite sensitiveness of the general public toward the independence of the blind will become even more acute.

Miss Lela Brown in the American Foundation for the Blind Bulletin on "Stand Concessions" states, "The prevalence of what we may call the non-economic type of stand placement was usually due to two conditions; either the policy of the organization allowed for no clear distinction between clients for whom a concession might be a genuine means of self-support and those for whom it could have little more than a therapeutic value; or else the technique of operating a stand was too little understood to make it seem a financially desirable kind of placement. Stand concessions are thought of less as a crutch with which to support vocational afflictions, and more as an opportunity for persons of stamina and ability. Placement agents have discovered that where one stand is not successful, many sighted persons, who think of the blind in terms of a group rather than as individuals, will attribute the failure to the incapacity of the sightless people generally. That one failure, therefore, redounds to the injury of many others to whom the occupation might be a successful adjustment. Concession grantors are approached in the ordinary way of business negotiation and not by appeals to sentiment. Blind persons are being selected for placement, not only because they need jobs, but because they are definitely qualified or qualifiable for

them. As a result, the status of the blind within this field has immeasurably improved." It is the fond hope of many rehabilitation workers that national legislation for stand concessions for the blind may be provided. Various unofficial moves were made in this direction recently in Washington but without practical results. A fertile field in this connection awaits the further action of the National Rehabilitation Association.

Several of the state rehabilitation forces have achieved signal success in pioneering movements for the employment of the blind as stand operators in public buildings. Rehabilitation agents in some of our larger cities, alone or in cooperation with other agencies working for the blind, have been able to obtain concessions for stand operating in city, county, and state buildings. Concerted action will be rewarded with "oil where the wheel squeaks loudest."

Mr. J. F. Clunk, National Supervisor of Industrial Employment, Canadian National Institute for the Blind, reports that with approximately six years of experience in developing concession and small business employment opportunities for the blind in Canada and operating stands in all types of locations, such as hospitals, public and governmental buildings, factories, and on the streets, a variety of results and experiences obtained focus attention to certain problems related to stand operating by the blind. Mr. Clunk reports that:

1. The average firm, corporation, or individual is not anxious to bring a blind person into his association when the responsibility for supervision, control, and discharge rests with the grantor of the concession. Very few sighted persons like to criticise a blind person or have the responsibility of discharging him from the job. As a result, the employment opportunity is refused rather than face this problem.

2. When concessions are secured, a blind person without organization backing seldom has sufficient money to properly equip the location and, as a result, all the potential

goodwill is lost from the beginning because of the poor opening and inadequate supplies.

3. Failures of blind persons are always attributed to their blindness and not to lack of ability, and others are condemned for the failure of their predecessors. When in full control of their concessions, some blind persons will sell their concession rights and equipment to the highest bidder and spend the money and apply to the organization for assistance again.

4. If the agency assumes the responsibility of supervision and control the cost of the service will probably be greater than is the relief usually allowed to the blind person for support without work. If the individual is placed in a good business, that work should not be a continuous expense or charge on public funds when such funds are needed to create similar opportunities for the unemployed.

5. Credit makes bad friends. Blind persons have a tendency to secure more credit than is good for them and frequently fail to meet their debts. The result is a bad reputation for all.

6. A system of administration is needed that will encourage initiative and responsibility, that will give all operators the fullest possible benefit from their labor, that will protect the weak against their own folly, that will protect the rights of the unemployed and future blind persons, that will permit expansion independently without increasing subsidy from the agency, that will break-down prejudices and hold the admiration and goodwill of the public.

In conclusion it must be pointed out that success in stand operation has not and will not come easily. Small beginnings in stand operating with carefully selected location, type of stand, and personnel, with flawless supervision will pave the way to the success and better understanding of the blind as well as a more ready acceptance of them as business men on a par with their sighted competitors.

To those rehabilitation agents and others who are interested in a study of the possibilities of stand operating by the blind, I strongly recommend the reading of, "Stand Concessions" by Lela T. Brown. This is published by The American Foundation for the Blind (Price 50¢) at 125 East 46th Street, New York City.

Mr. J. F. Clunk, National Supervisor of Industrial Employment, Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Toronto, Canada, has written an admirable article entitled "Administration System of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind for Stand Concessions" for "Outlook."

I wish to express my appreciation and indebtedness to Mr. R. B. Irwin, Miss Evelyn C. McKay, and Miss Lela T. Brown, all of the American Foundation for the Blind and to Mr. J. F. Clunk, National Supervisor of Industrial Employment, Canadian National Institute for the Blind, for the information and help they gave in the preparation of this paper.

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Employment of the blind through the use of stands in public buildings.

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